Editorial Comment

Irish to be hit first by ID cards

THE IRISH it would seem are again to be among the first to be discriminated against under the government's latest quick fix plan to bring in ID cards for all citizens.

While the proposal to introduce ID cards is allegedly still under consultation Home Secretary David Blunkett has announced that this pervasive form of intrusion into people's private lives will come into effect anyway. Though, while British citizens will be able to wait until 2013 before they are forced to pay some exorbitant amount for an ID card, Irish and other EU nationals will have the pleasure of coughing up in three years time. A blatant case of discrimination if ever there was one.

At present a free travel zone exists between Britain and Ireland but this is all about to become a thing of the past when Mr Blunkett brings in his latest public order wheeze. What also of those nationalists in Northern Ireland who consider themselves to be Irish – will they be required to carry cards in three years time while unionists wait another seven years before they qualify?

It was this type of blatant discrimination that led to the conflict in the north of Ireland in the first place. It is difficult, short of stamping unionist or nationalist on individual foreheads, to think of a more divisive way of splintering an already divided society.

What exactly is the point of ID cards anyway? The limp excuse offered by government is the usual, it will help prevent terrorism and make crime detection easier. Yet one would suspect terrorists and criminals are not going to have any problem obtaining fake ID cards when required. As usual the people most effected will be the weak and vulnerable in society. The police will be given yet another power to use to intimidate the population. Today people are required to have documents for their vehicles and if they do not possess them when stopped to present them at a police station in the next three days. Now with the ID card the individual citizen will have to reassert his or her right just to be allowed to walk down the street if required to do so by a police officer.

In the same week as Blunkett introduced his ID cards further Big Brother measures were passing through the House of Lords in the form of what has become known as "the snoopers charter." The orders that make up the "charter" will allow government departments and agencies to demand email and phone records from service providers. There is some loose regulation but the measures most definitely dovetail in with the world of ID cards and surveillance.

The sad thing is the ease with which populist politicians like David Blunkett seem able to exploit a public panic that in the most part they themselves helped ferment in the first place. Over recent years, and particularly since 11 September 2003, the Home Office together with other government departments has become obsessed with following the security agenda. As documented in this paper such an agenda has always been prevalent in the Irish context but has become more prominent and accelerated relating to other groups recently. It is at times as though there is a mad rush going on to remove the most basic of civil liberties before the mass of the population realise what is going on.

Surely, a much better idea would be for Mr Blunkett to look seriously at ways to address crime and terrorism without destroying civil liberties. ID cards have all the hallmark characteristics of Blunkett's Home Office, namely an ill thought out quick fix to a problem that does not really exist. No doubt we will also see the trademark embarrassing Blunkett climb down amid much recrimination. Let's hope this time though the blame ends up where it truly belongs with Mr Blunkett.

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RISING TIDE OF RACISM AGAINST TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

PAUL DONOVAN looks at the continuing racism being directed toward the travelling community and some hopeful signs that things maybe about to change for the better

RACISM AGAINST Irish Travellers and Gypsies seems to be on the increase if events of the past few weeks are much to go by.

At Firle in east Sussex, an effigy of a caravan with pictures of Travellers on the outside was pushed into a fire as part of local celebrations. There had been problems between local people and Travellers camped in the vicinity over the preceding months. At nearby Lewes the local people burn an effigy of the Pope every year.

"There seems to be a wider issue there of anti-Catholicism, all happening under the watchful eye of the east Sussex constabulary, so it would be interesting to know their view on race crime," said Father Joe Brown of the Catholic Church's Traveller Chaplaincy. "There need to be steps taken to ensure that this year will never be repeated."

The Irish deaths in custody group CEART has likened the burning of the effigies in Firle to "the cross burning carried out by the KKK in American states during the Black peoples fight for civil rights during the 1960's."

Some 14 people have now been arrested by Sussex Police in connection with the actions at Firle.

Then hard on the heels of the blatant racism of Firle came a report from the National Farmers Union declaring Travellers to be "rural outlaws" who cost farmers £100 million. The report claimed that some farmers spend more than £1500 on clean up costs. More than 20 per cent of the 2,000 farmers questioned in the survey claimed to have been victims of physical threats while over half had equipment stolen.

The NFU in reality seem to have cobbled together some rather spurious facts to present themselves as the victims. "We haven't seen any evidence to back up the figures. They refer to illegal and legal Travellers but to us there is no such thing as an illegal Traveller," said Fr Brown. "These comments are not helpful, especially made in such an inflammatory way. They should engage with the relevant people before making such accusations."

Terry Stewart, the coordinator of CEART, believes the attitudes betrayed in the NFU report dovetail with the actions taken at Firle. The attitude of the farmers portrayed in the report lead to actions like those at Firle. Stewart though does not believe that the NFU report is in anyway representative of rural attitudes generally.

Talk to some of the Travelling community and another story comes out altogether. They feel under attack with whole rural communities often turning against them, while the police stand by - slow to react to such abuse. It is notable that it took more than two weeks for Sussex Police to make arrests relating to the Firle incident. The question ofcourse is had the story not been featured in the media would the Sussex Police have acted at all?

The ultimate outcome of what happens when racist attitudes like those displayed in Firle and elsewhere go unchecked was seen when in June the 15 year old Traveller John Delaney was killed. The trial of the two teenagers charged with his murder began last Monday.

John Delaney

Andrew Ryder, the chairman of the Traveller Law Reform Coalition, has been trying to promote reconciliation between the local settled population and people in Firle. "We've been looking for common ground, meeting Travellers and arranging meetings with the local MP Norman Baker," said Ryder.

Ryder has little time for the NFU report which he describes as "irresponsible." He believes that such an ill-considered report simply undermines the credibility of the NFU.

Yvonne McNamara of the Brent Irish Advisory Service Travellers Project, believes recent events show how bad things have got for the Traveller community. "The "Travellers are incredibly victimised. If there had been the effigies of four black people put into the fire at Firle there would rightly have been national headlines. Travellers are second class citizens so receive this treatment," said McNamara.

She believes that the politicians and police have to take responsibility for the situation and address it in a bold manner.

Labour MP Kevin McNamara, who is chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Travellers Law Reform (APPGTLR) believes attacks like those at Firle and from the NFU show "the raw nerve of racist Britain."

"These incidents underline what I and my Parliamentary colleagues in the APPGTLR have been pressing for, namely a recognition of the challenges facing Travellers and the suffering caused by the misunderstandings of some as to their way of life," said McNamara.

McNamara believes that it is the problems of accommodation and ongoing discrimination that need to be given priority by government.

Under the Caravans Sites Act 1968 local authorities had to make sites and facilities available for Traveller communities to access. This right was reversed with the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Even before the CJPOA though many local authorities did not comply with the law regarding the provision of sites. The result of the CJPOA has been that Travellers finish up in a state of perpetual motion being constantly moved on by one local authority after another.

Discrimination by local authorities to get Travellers off their land can also take more subtle forms. Some local authorities will deliberately fail to collect refuse from Traveller sites, allowing it to build up thereby ensuring that the Traveller community conform to the popular stereotype that Travellers are dirty and unhealthy. Pressure then builds from the settled population to move them on.

A recent government initiative has enabled Traveller groups to buy their own sites under privatisation of site provision but again the underlying racial prejudice is evident with 90 per cent of planning permission applications being rejected. For the settled population there is usually an 80 per cent approval rate for planning permission applications.

Travellers also have problems getting on GP's waiting lists.

"Every piece of government legislation for Travellers comes in the form of criminal law. There are anti-social families on every housing estate but the estate is not closed down for that reason. Yet that is what happens when there is one disruptive Traveller family in a community," said Fr Brown.

There are now moves to get the duty on local authorities to provide sites restored. The Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recently recommended the reintroduction of "a statutory duty on local authorities to 'make' or 'facilitate' the provision of sites for Gypsies and Travellers." Research done for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister found there needed to be 2,000 new sites set up over the next five years to meet demand.

The Traveller Law Reform Coalition together with the Commission for Racial Equality and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) have come together to campaign for amendments to the upcoming Housing Bill in order to gain recognition for Travellers. At present the draft Housing Bill contains no mention of the needs for Traveller's sites. Julie Morgan, Labour MP for Cardiff North and the vice chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Travellers Law Reform, will seek to get amendments to the Housing Bill passed. "We think the issue of accommodation is at the heart of much of the prejudice and exclusion from which Travellers suffer, if that can be addressed their equality status can be improved," said Heaven Crawley, associate director of the IPPR.

Many of the amendments sought are likely to come from the Travellers Law Reform Bill (TLRB) which was introduced in June by David Atkinson, the Conservative MP for Bournemouth. The bill fell but it is hope to implement many of its provisions through a variety of legislation beginning with the Housing Bill.

So there is a growing awareness of the plight of Travellers in the wider community. Even the NFU report recognized the need for sites to be provided. Important recent developments such as the coalition coming together to lobby on the Housing Bill and the Parliamentary lobby groups show not only a growing awareness of the plight of Travellers but also of the community itself beginning to find its authentic voice. The NFU report, events in Firle and the tragedy of John Delaney show there is much to be done but there are also some encouraging signs of movement.